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DIMENSIONS OF MASJID ARCHITECTURE

Perspectives and Writings in Theory and Design



Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design
International Islamic University Malaysia

Al-Bukhary Foundation

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In commemoration of the 20th anniversary of KAED 2016

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Published by:
Kulliyyah of Architecture and
Environmental Design(KAED), IIUM

Supported by
Al Bukhary Foundation

National Library of Malaysia Cataloguing-in-
Publication data ISBN

ISBN: 978-983-3142-33-0
First Edition

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Book Cover Design / Layout Design:
MKBGraphics, Virtuocity System Sdn. Bhd
No.47, Level 3, Jalan Wangsa Setia 3, Taman
Wangsa Melawati, 53300, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Copy Editing and Proofreading:
K.J. Editorial Studio
Lot 332, Lorong Bukit A2, Cheras Baru, 56100,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Printed by:
MPH Group Printing (M) Sdn.Bhd. No.31, Jalan
2/148A,
Taman Sungai Besi Industrial Park, 57100, Kuala
Lumpur, Malaysia

Distributed by
MPH Distributors Sdn Bhd

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CHAPTER 11

The Heritage of Hohhot: A Journey Through a Community Masjid in China

Ali Raza Soomro

Aida Kesuma Azmin

11.1 INTRODUCTION

Heritage architecture is a sign of not only the potentials of creating symbols in a city, but also is a testament to the potentialities of adaptive reuse of valuable old structures. The Great Masjid of Hohhot, also known as the Qingzhen Dasi, symbolizes not only the capacities of heritage structures to be adapted but also symbolises the significance of Muslims as a growing minority in a predominantly non-Muslim country. It was built namely for the Hui people, which is an

the ethnic minority in Hohhot. Categorized as the 'national minority' type of Islamic architecture in China, the masjid is unique as it reflects the integration of Islamic religious practices with traditional Chinese urban fabric including architectural planning, construction and formal details. Built out of brickwork and wooden structures, the Great Masjid is the largest and the oldest masjid out of the 11 masjids in the Hohhot city.

Built within the Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Great Masjid of Hohhot stands elegantly on the east of

South Tongdao Street near the Zhongshan Xi Lu intersection. Due to the local government's efforts in recent years to promote the cultures of ethnic minorities in the Hohhot, the South Tongdao Street has been well known for its Islamic architecture-themed streets. It is within this context that the Great Masjid, located facing the South Tongdao Street, is a prominent landmark of the street. It proudly plays its role in representing the Muslim minority, namely the Hui people of Hohhot. Surrounding the Great Masjid are commercial areas, institutional buildings and residential areas which greatly add to the urban life and hustle and bustle life in the city.

11.2 HISTORY

Based on the writings found in the masjid, the Great Masjid was believed to have been constructed in Kang Xi 22 Year, around 1693. It was built during the reign of Emperor Kang Xi of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 A.D) after throngs of the Hui Muslim minority migrated from Xinjiang to Mongolia. Since its construction, the masjid is still used from 316 years. Qingzhen Dasi went through an extension in Qian Long 54 Year in 1789, and was remedied several times in 1869, 1892, 1896, 1923 and 1939.

The whole masjid compound area covers about 5000 sqm² which encompasses prayer halls, courtyards, hostels and madrasah. The total area of the main prayer hall is around 435m², which could accommodate up to 600 people at a time. The extended prayer hall and sometimes the courtyard is also used if the number of people increases at

any given time.

According to Miao Zhin Xin, an imam of a nearby masjid in Hohhot, the masjid serves as a center for all the Muslims in Hohhot. Presently, the masjid is protected under the local government and is listed in the Hohhot Heritage List.

11.2.1 The Development

There are four original buildings in the compound, constructed around 1693: the prayer hall (Daijing Tang), the teacher's hall (Jiang Tang), the imam's room and the library. The minaret (Wang Yue Tower) was later added during the period of Republic of China around 1939 and it was known as the 'Moon Watching Tower'. On top of the minaret, a crescent-shaped lamp is fixed at the peak of the hexagonal pagoda style roof. It was later that, the development of the Muslim cleansing areas and the extension of the prayer hall was undertaken. Then, later on, the masjid compound evolved further with the addition of structures for schools and hostels. These have resulted in three different courtyards that stand in line along the axis of the whole masjid complex.

11.3 FUNCTIONS

The Great Masjid of Hohhot not only serves as a place of worship but also caters for other purposes such as being a place for religious education, community centre, a place to conduct wedding ceremonies, funerals, and other things related to Islamic activities. This character of multi-



Figure 11.1: Portico in the Main Prayer Hall



Figure 11.2: Ceiling decoration of the Main prayer hall

functionalism makes the masjid different from other religious buildings. Architecturally, the masjid has a series of individual buildings with their specific functions all gathered in a compound that eventually form a large complex.

11.3.1 Space for Prayer

The five daily prayers is an obligation for all Muslims, and to perform it congregationally is part of the Sunnah. A most important purpose in constructing a masjid is to provide a place where the surrounding Muslims can gather and perform the congregational prayer. The prayer areas in the masjid include the main prayer hall, the extended prayer area (which is located next to the main prayer hall), the female prayer hall located at the upper floor, and the female madrasah block. Sometimes, when there is an overflow of people especially during important events such as Eid, the spaces in the courtyard will be used.

Other than the five daily prayers, the masjid is also a place for performing the obligatory Friday prayer, the Eid al-fitr prayer and Qurban rituals. Interestingly, before a congregational prayer is performed, the students of the madrasah will queue at the courtyard in two straight lines as soon as the adhan or the call for prayer is heard. The grand imam queues together with the students and waits for the adhan to end before making his way into the hall, followed by the students. This formation is said to be reminiscent of the discipline, regimentation, strength and unity of the

Muslim armies of old, as they march into the battle field, and it reflects the disciplined attitude of the Chinese Muslims in China.

11.3.2 Masjid as an Education Center

As a center for Muslims in Hohhot, the Great Masjid of Hohhot also functions as an education center and serves as a place for students to acquire Islamic knowledge. There is a separation between male and female classrooms in blocks and hostels. The female classrooms are located in area facing the north side of the masjid compound while the male classrooms are located on the south side. Hostels are provided for both male and female students, and they are located within the masjid compound. Whatever contributions or income that the masjid receives is allocated for educational purposes so as to relieve the students from the burden of fees for food and lodging.

According to an interview with Ustaz Yaakob, is a teacher working in the masjid, Islamic education in Qingzhen Dasi is conducted in both Arabic and Chinese language and the syllabus is somewhat different from what is being taught in conventional schools. Generally, there are four subjects taught, and these are the Arabic Language, the Chinese Language, Tawheed, and Syari'ah studies. Upon completion, a certificate will be awarded by the masjid authorities. Currently there are 36 female students and 35 male students studying in the madrassah. The duration of study is 3 years,

and it is subdivided into a six months study period for one semester. The academic staffs include six male teacher (Ustaz) and six female teachers (Ustazah).

11.3.3 Weddings and Community

In Hohhot, it is common for weddings from both sides of the bride and groom to invite the imam of the masjid to conduct the aqad nikah. It is said to be the tradition of the Muslims in China to organize such events in the masjid. In Qingzhen Dasi, the wedding ceremony is usually conducted in the masjid restaurant or in the multipurpose room in the masjids compound. It is the tradition that the groom would carry the bride to the wedding ceremony area after the aqad nikah and the wedding is celebrated in a cheerful manner.

11.3.4 Religious Festivals

During the holy month of Ramadan, the Muslims would break their fast at the Masjid's restaurant in the complex. During Eid al-fitr or other religious festivals, the masjid opens its doors to the Muslim communities and welcomes them with many events and programs. The Eid prayer would be conducted in the prayer hall, the gathering and performances would be at the courtyard, and the feast would be at the restaurant or the multipurpose rooms.

11.3.5 Funerals

As with other masjids, this masjid also serves an important purpose—to manage funerals for the deceased Muslims. The janazah, or the body of the deceased will be carried by men who wear traditional white headgears with white cloths wrapped around their waists. A special prayer will be conducted congregationally outside the courtyard to pay respect to the dead before he or she is buried.

11.3.6 Maintenance and Income

In order to generate income for the maintenance of the masjid, the masjid administration runs a restaurant that serves halal food specifically for the Muslims. Besides that, shops and stalls are rented to the local people to generate more income. The stalls in front of the masjid for example, sell various choices of halal foods and drinks. As an antiquity which is protected by law, the Great Masjid is supported by the local government; however, lamaseries and temples get more attention and are subsidized fully by the government.

Besides that, part of the masjid compound is rented to a local public school, which is also a source of an income for the masjid. According to the interview with Miao Zhi Xin, the money is spent for the masjid's maintenance, Islamic activities and religious education for children.



Figure 11.3: The stalls were rented to the locals in front of the Great Masjid



Figure 11.4; Local Muslims handling the funeral

11.4 LANGUAGE AND DESIGN

The Great Masjid was originally conceived and designed by a Han native named Ba Shien Er, a non-Muslim from Xansi province. Built during the Qing dynasty in 1693, the masjid mostly adopts the method of ancient Chinese style of construction of that dynasty (interview with Miao Zhi Xin). As the most significant masjid in Hohhot, the reminiscent style of Ancient Chinese temples can be seen from its roof and the main structural frame. Influences from Mongolian ornaments for the detailing and decorations can also be discerned in the interior and exterior of the masjid.

The building material for the structural framing is mainly wood. Wood, according to ancient Chinese architecture, plays a significant role in symbolizing "life". A thick brick wall was constructed in order to overcome the cold weather of Hohhot, while the roof tiles are made of clay tiles similar to most buildings in China.

The architectural style of the Great Masjid is a mixture of the language and traditions of ancient Chinese architecture, fused with Arabic-Islamic style and infused with Mongolian art and decoration. However, the most noticeable and dominant influence is of the Chinese architectural grammar and language in design, which can be seen in the application of Chinese design principles, features, construction methods and the overall planning and layout of the masjid compound.

Typically, there are three basic elements that shape the fundamentals of ancient Chinese architecture. The elements are the foundation platform, the timber frame construction, and the decorative roof. The four-sided rectangular enclosure, which is the wall structure, forms at right angles and is oriented cardinally. These are evident in the oldest structures in the masjid compound. They encompass the main prayer hall, the imam's room, the teacher's hall, and the library. Four of the buildings were designed in rectangular plan following the typical ancient Chinese form with a modification of direction to Qibla. Traditionally, the form originates from the manifestation of a traditional belief in a square-shaped universe with four world quarters.

Designed by a Han ethnic architect, the Great Masjid of Hohhot follows the basic ancient Chinese construction method of timber framing system and brickwork enclosure. This refers to the oldest buildings in the masjid compound which are the main prayer hall, the teacher's hall, imam's room, and the library.

Apart from that, the roofs of the buildings within the compound have the influence of the Chinese roof style. This style amalgamates various styles of roofs such as the gable roof and pagoda style roof. In Chinese architecture, the roof functions not only as a protective element, but also as elements with deeper symbolic meanings in some cases.

The pagoda style roof intersects with wavy gable roof as seen in the main prayer hall. It is said that the five pagoda roof, with three of them being octagonal and another two of hexagonal in plan, symbolize the five pillars of Islam. In Chinese architecture, the pagodas are quite significant and are usually used for religious purposes especially in Buddhist beliefs. Pagodas are often praised for the 360 views they offer, and many poems in Chinese history attest to the joy of scaling pagodas. In the Qinzhen Dasi, the pagoda roof not only enhances the Chinese architecture of the building, but also acts as a mechanism to allow natural light to enter to the main prayer hall.

There are several features of the Great Masjid which are identical to Chinese architecture, ranging from the structural parts to its decorative features. Firstly, there is an emphasis on the horizontal axis, which is observed particularly on the stone platform and uniformity of the roof, with the vertical walls being less emphasized. This is applied in order to achieve a visual impact due to the width of the buildings, thus, creating its own esthetical appeal from the external appearance of the building.

The traditional Chinese architecture involves the construction of several buildings in a complex that encloses open spaces within it. This can be seen in the Great Masjid which comprises of three numbers of open courtyards enclosed by the buildings in the compound.

Apart from that, the design of the Great Masjid portrays another important principle which is the hierarchy

in placement of buildings that are based on function and significance. In this case, the main prayer hall which is considered as the main and most important building which is elevated on a platform and distinguished by its location facing the front side with greater elaborated ornamentation and symbolic roofs. Another feature of ancient Chinese architecture is the emphasis on bilateral symmetry as portrayed in the design of the building, which signifies harmony and balance.

11.4.1 Layout

The principle of axis, symmetry and balance found in ancient Chinese architecture were adopted in most Islamic buildings in China. Similarly, the Great Masjid compound adopts the layout similar to the Chinese Palace that combines several units of space with the principle of balance and symmetry. The layout of the masjid is flexible, unlike some other masjids which do not have fixed position and style in addition to making the courtyard and great prayer hall as focal points. Thus, it does not only function as a central communication area, but also as a space in case there is an increase in the number of people there.

The masjid compound layout adopts several basic principles. In the design of the masjid compound, the arrangement of the buildings is based on a grid layout and follows the principle of hierarchy according to the importance of function. The main axis line is defined by the



Figure 11.5: View of entrance to Extended Prayer Hall



Figure 11.6: Contributor's area

center of the main prayer hall and the courtyard in front of it as a guideline. With this, the lecturer's room, imam's room and other buildings are arranged on both sides of the line, resulting in a series of spatial entities that give the whole layout some depth.

In the layout, the two sets of individual buildings around the central space, which is the courtyard, eventually form the architectural complex. The courtyard plays a significant role in bringing the people to the center of the masjid and serves as an important space for communication and in case of overspill of users. Besides that, the courtyard also acts as a central focal point in the compound and it is surrounded by the other main buildings.

Generally, for the main gateway, many masjids employ the technique of placing three gateways side by side. The taller and more spacious center gateway clearly differentiates the primary and secondary ones. Similarly, the main gate of this masjid is designed with beautiful decorations on the screening wall of the gate highlighting the presence and fundamentals of symmetry and axial planning.

11.5 THE MAIN PRAYER HALL

The main prayer hall or also known in Chinese as Daijing tang shengdian is the most important building in the masjid compound. It is the place where Muslims perform the congregational daily prayers and gather for religious purposes. According to local anecdotes, more than two

thousand people attend the Friday prayers and more than five hundred people participate in the daily prayers.

The prayer hall is the larger part of the great hall where a sermon is given every Friday. Inside the prayer hall are arrays of columns with calligraphy in Arabic and Chinese and colorful decorative ceiling patterns. Natural lighting penetrates through the windows of the pagoda-like structures on the roofs, creating a sense of sacredness.

The main prayer hall can hold a total of 600 people at a time. Apart from performing the five times daily prayers, Muslims are also obligated to perform the weekly congregational prayer. Congregational prayers are also done during Islamic religious festivals such as qurban and during the month of Ramadan. Therefore, to fulfil these functions, the hall had to be expanded and rebuilt from time to time.

As a major space, the main prayer hall stands symmetrically along the axis line with the other subsidiary ones around it. The positioning of the main prayer hall symbolizes the direction of the Qibla and this sets the location of the mihrab inside the hall. Generally, the main prayer hall is composed of three parts, which are the portico, the prayer hall and the rear mihrab wall.

11.5.1 The Portico

The portico is a place to take off one's shoes before entering the main prayer hall. Again, if the great hall is filled to its capacity, this large portico could be used for prayer.

11.5.2 The Rear Mihrab

The mihrab is located in the wall facing the Mecca (Qibla). Due to this, the layout of the courtyard system extends westwards, where the main axis line for the masjid runs from east to west.

The architectural language of the main prayer hall is quite unique as it portrays a mixture of Chinese and Arabic designs with some influences of Mongolian art in its ornamentations. The building itself is elevated on a raised platform and is distinguished from other buildings with a greater elaboration on the ornamentations and shape. Another significant element of the building is expressed by its symmetrical design principle with a strong axis that extends from west to east defined by the direction of qibla.

The roof of the masjid shows an adoption of Chinese architecture style into the building, as it uses a mixture of three types of roof forms, which are *juan peng*, *ying shan*, and pagoda style roof. The main framing system is made of wood, which is part of the common structural system used in most ancient Chinese architecture. As for the interior of the hall, the space is highly decorated with Arabic calligraphy and floral ornamentations painted with bright colors.

11.6 THE MOON WATCHING TOWER

In China, the minarets are usually built slightly later than the masjid or the prayer hall. Similar to the Great Masjid of Hohhot, the minaret, also known as the "Awakening Tower", and the "Moon-watching Tower", was built later on during the period of the Republic of China, around 1939. On top of the minaret, a crescent-shaped lamp is fixed at the peak with an impressive hexagonal pagoda style roof.

The minaret is a five-storied hexagonal brick edifices super-imposed by the form of a Chinese style pavilion. Some parts of the minaret adopted Arabic style which has tall and slender hexagonal walls made of smartly arranged brick and stone. The top of the minaret ends with a Chinese style pavilion. The walls of the minaret use mainly black brick, while the roof structure is made of Chinese style timber framing system.

The minaret Qingzhen Dasi is built for a series of purposes. Firstly, it acts as a landmark to help people to identify the location of the masjid easily. During the olden days, the tower was also used to confirm the dates for fasting and Eid. This tower is decorated with repetitive patterns and has Arabic calligraphy along with Chinese writings on some parts of the walls. The square-arch windows add to the beauty of this minaret. The simplicity of the decoration is to give attention to the pagoda roof, making it the most prominent and tallest structure in the

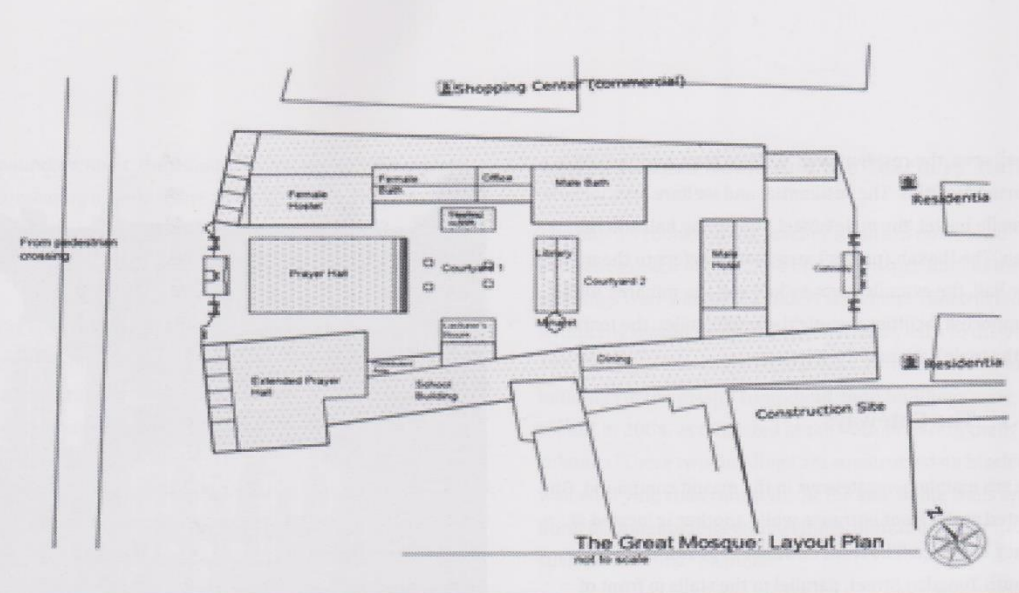


Figure 11.7: The entire masjid complex layout of Hohhot Great Masjid (Qingzhen Dasi)



Figure 11.8: The Moon-watching tower/ minaret



Figure 11.9: Teacher's Hall

(prayer) area, the residential or welfare area, and the supported facilities. The residential and welfare area include the female hostel, the male hostel, the dining hall and the kitchen. The Ibadah (prayer) area mainly refers to the main prayer hall, the extended prayer hall and the minaret, while the supported facilities include the public toilet, the female bath, the male bath and the gateways.

11.7.1 The Gateways

There are mainly two gateways in the masjid compound. One is located at the front entrance while another is located at the back entrance. The front entrance is positioned facing the South Tongdao Street, parallel to the stalls in front of the Great Masjid Complex. The gateway is highly decorated with floral patterns with a small wu dian roof style on top to emphasize its function as the main entry way to the masjid.

11.7.2 The Extended Prayer Hall

The extended prayer hall is positioned next to the main prayer hall at the front side of the Great Masjid complex. The extended prayer hall functions as a secondary place to hold congregational prayers whenever there is an overspill of people in the masjid, during events such as Eid al-ftr, Qurban and Friday prayers.



Figure 11.8: Front gateway of Hohhot Great Masjid (Qingzhen Dasi)

compound. At night, the minaret brightens up with colorful lights, creating a lively scene along the South Tongdao Street.

11.7 LAYOUT

The Great Masjid complex can be zoned into four main categories which are the administration area, the Ibadah that The architecture of the extended prayer hall is a duplication of the main prayer hall, whereby some influence of Mongolian decorative elements can be seen on the facade. The shape of the facade follows the main prayer hall except the construction and fittings are simplified with the use of steel beams and concrete columns together with aluminum casement glass doors at the entrances. The roof of the extended hall adopts the Hexagonal Pagoda style constructed intersecting the flat slab.

11.7.3 Contributors' Area

Located next to the extended prayer hall, the contributors' area displays a row of stones carved with Chinese scriptures describing the history of the masjid and names of the contributors for the visitors to read and learn more about the masjid. These stones are housed within a simple structure and topped with a typical Chinese style roof. Near to it, is a row of benches intended mainly for people to rest or wait before the start of congregational prayers.

11.7.4 Imam's Room and the Teachers' Hall

The imam's room and the teacher's hall are positioned adjacent to each other, in the first courtyard. Both of the buildings were among the oldest structures constructed within the masjid compound, which dates back to the year 1693. Designed as a rectangular plan as in most of other buildings in the masjid compound, both buildings were rebuilt in 2004, as indicated at the bottom part of their columns. These two buildings are constructed on black brick wall with ying shan roof style. At the side of the walls are floral ornamentations with writings of Arabic calligraphy such as the word ' Bismillah' .

11.7.5 The Male Hostel, Dining Hall and Classrooms

There is another building located opposite the library in the second courtyard, which consists of the dining hall at the ground floor, and the male hostels and classrooms on the first floor. According to the people in the masjid, the dining hall is specifically for the male students and is used for special events. It is observed that the design of the building adopts the Chinese architecture vocabulary constructed on a black brick wall with the 'ying shan' gable roof style. The building is seen quite simple in its ornamentations with repetitions of red columns and windows to emphasize the idea of balance and symmetry, as compared to the main prayer hall which is highly decorated.

The other buildings within the masjid compound are seen to have adapted similar architectural language that represents the symbolic identity of the masjid, in the middle of the Hohhot city. Though they were built later than the original buildings there, the architectural style remains quite similar to the original except with lesser and simpler ornamentations. The design concept of the 300-year-old Great Masjid seems to relate back to the concept of masjid in the Middle East, where the masjid there serve not only as a place to hold prayer, but also as a community and education center.

11.8 CONCLUSIONS

Essentially, the architecture of this Great Masjid is known for its beautiful mix between Chinese and Arabic style. The appearance of the crescent moon and star minaret is beautiful, slender and solemn. All built in black brick, the most grandeur building is the grand prayer hall, behind which are located both the teaching hall and the Muslim baths. All the buildings we carved with Muslim characters, and the most famous are the over 30 volumes of ancient Koran scriptures, all of which were written in Arabic.

This masjid reminds us of the essential universality of Islam. The communal and spiritual elements of a typical masjid are all present and each feature and aspect takes a life of its own as it contributes to the active development

and continuous well being of the Muslim community. It is the community that gives a soul to a masjid. Though this masjid is not modern in the sense of technology and material, its heritage value and the fusion of Chinese architectural traditions and Islamic style is unique and priceless. Such architectural language can be rarely found elsewhere in the world.

The masjid reminds us that there is no set and predetermined language of form of a masjid. Essentially its form must highlight the centrality and significance of the prayer hall and the iconic role of minarets and towers. A masjid breathes a life of its own when it essentially fulfils the requirements, needs and spiritual and physical well being of the people. The Great Masjid of Hohhot recalls a spiritual oasis amidst a large country and a constant and living reminder of the existence and persistence of the Islamic faith in many parts of the world.

DIMENSIONS OF MASJID ARCHITECTURE

Perspectives and Writings in Theory and Design

Mosque or masjid architecture has been the subject of a continuous flow of writings, theoretical discourses, design statements and formal interpretations in the past. Its evolution in terms of form has ranged from simple beginnings to emotive structures throughout history; and in recent times, from faithful reconstructions of the 'traditional' to the heroic gestures of the 'avant-garde'. Rather than a continued focus on history, aesthetics and form, this book attempts to bridge the world of theory and practice by converging past writings and thoughts, with built work. In a compilation of transliterated lectures, writings and discourses of case studies on the subject, the multidisciplinary fields on 'masjid' architecture are explored; not only in terms of design and language but amongst others, in terms of links to theory, the ideals of multiculturalism, the agenda of sustainability, the necessity of heritage and the importance of asset management. This interweaving of discourses and design practices including perspectives on the arts, heritage, planning, sustainability and philosophy is but a necessary step towards building a framework of theory on the masjid through a dynamic oscillation and fusion between the world of 'ideas and values' of Islam and the realities of the built environment and its practices in the modern world.

ISBN 978-983-3142-33-0



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